

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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Citygarden realizes Gateway Mall's best possibilities

Picking a July day with low humidity, a sweet breeze and noon-time temperatures hovering in the high 70s to debut an outdoor sculpture garden in the heart of downtown St. Louis clearly was a smart strategy.

Those conditions greeted Wednesday's curtain raising at Citygarden — a two-block, tree-lined, grass-trimmed, multi-terraced, shrub-and-flower resplendent, fountain-centric, limestone-walled, granite-paved and waterfall-graced public place that is punctuated by classical, abstract, fanciful and monumental outdoor art, served by a lovely cafe and bounded by Market and Chestnut Streets between 8th and 10th Streets.

But Citygarden is no fair-weather attraction. Indeed, it seems poised to become one of those rare St. Louis places for all seasons.

This spectacular addition to St. Louis cultural landscape hardly seemed possible given the Gateway Mall's depressing modern history. Reading through news clips beginning in the early 1980s, one will learn — or be reminded — how just about every power broker, blowhard, banking giant and corporate tycoon in town joined a tug-of-war over what to do with this downtown centerpiece.

They got around to tearing down architectural gems they deemed obsolete — the Buder, International and Title Guarantee buildings most prominent among them. But the big shots were long on fantasy and short on follow through. For more than 20 years, these two blocks stood empty.

Citygarden is so lovely it accentuates even the best of what surrounds it. It's a fitting next-door neighbor to Richard Serra's critically celebrated steel slab sculpture "Twain," a worthy backyard to the

magnificently restored Civil Courts Building and another compelling frame for Saarinen's Gateway Arch.

Indeed, it owes much to the Serra sculpture and vindicates the early decision to situate public art at the center of the city. It also softens unfortunate mistakes — such as the claptrap glass and steel Gateway One Building to the east and the "Darth Vader" Bank of America building to the south.

Citygarden, with all its twists and turns, offers people many places to go. Parts of it are a quiet respite, others a boisterous resort. It will become a lunch place for office workers, a tour stop for day trippers, an evening stroll and place of relaxation for downtown loft dwellers, hotel guests and their children — perhaps even a fountain frolic for would-be Scott and Zelda Fitzgeralds intent on happier endings.

The project was presented to the city's Preservation Board in October 2007. It was completed, in all its complexity and elegance, in less than two years.

Citygarden was a \$30 million gift from the Gateway Foundation, a private philanthropy founded by the late Aaron and Teresa Fischer. The foundation's board members don't want public recognition, but for their quiet and generous giving, they deserve deep and sincere thanks.